

A25. —

WASHINGTON POST
19 February 1987

Polygraph Study Fails, OTA Says

2-Year Test Project By Defense Dept. Is Summarized

By R. Jeffrey Smith
Washington Post Staff Writer

CHICAGO, Feb. 18—The congressional Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) has concluded that a two-year effort by the Defense Department to determine the value of widespread polygraph screening produced no useful data, an OTA researcher told scientists assembled here today.

The experiment "has not been conducted so that Congress will know anything about the validity" of using lie detectors to screen employees for sensitive positions, said Denise Dougherty, a psychological researcher who examined the effort for OTA.

In addition, Dougherty said, a Pentagon program of scientific research on polygraphs ordered by Congress in 1984 "has not been started."

Dougherty, who spoke at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, explained that the goal of the polygraph experiment was to help Congress evaluate the "validity and general utility" of a 1985 DOD proposal to use polygraphs routinely in interviews of job applicants. While that is a longstanding practice at the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency, Defense has mainly confined its use of polygraphs to investigations.

An earlier OTA report found "no scientific foundation" for the Pentagon's proposal, but Congress agreed to authorize a three-year test of 14,000 employees under consideration for assignment or promotion to sensitive jobs. It also authorized \$590,000 for a separate scientific research program.

A polygraph exam, which can last up to 3½ hours, monitors blood pressure and skin temperature during intensive questioning. The goal is to isolate false responses by recording subtle and fleeting physiological changes. Roughly 2.5 million polygraph exams are conducted annually in the United States for job screening and criminal investigations, according to congressional testimony last year.

The Defense Department reported in January that due to a shortage of trained polygraph examiners, only 4,000 exams were actually conducted under the test program in 1985 and 1986, a period in which 7,000 were planned. (According to a study last fall by the General Accounting Office, an additional 13,800 polygraph exams were conducted by the department outside the program in 1985.)

In addition, only \$100,000 was actually spent, Dougherty said, a circumstance the Pentagon attributes to difficulties in hiring officials for its new Polygraph Research Institute in Ft. McClellan, Ala.

In its January report to Congress, the Pentagon called the test program a success because it resulted in the discovery of inadvertent disclosures by eight people who had earlier access to classified information, as well as discovery of potential spying by four others. In addition, nine candidates either were not hired or were reassigned because they refused to be polygraphed or because the results were inconclusive.

Dougherty and Leonard Saxe, an associate professor at Boston University who chaired the previous OTA study, criticized the Pentagon for inadequate efforts to verify the accuracy of the tests by checking independently what the "cleared" subjects said during the polygraphs.

On the basis of his own studies and his review of the literature, Saxe said polygraph tests are "neither reliable nor valid for protecting national security," partly because those subjected to polygraphs can readily employ deceptive "countermeasures."

These include "tightening the sphincter muscle" during key questions, Saxe said, a technique that increases blood pressure and is not readily detected. In general, Saxe said, the polygraph is prone to error whenever the person being examined is skeptical of its effectiveness and therefore is not nervous.

No one from the Defense Department participated in the meeting today, but the use of polygraph exams for job screening was defended by NSA General Counsel Elizabeth Rindskopf. "Is the polygraph flawless?" Rindskopf asked. "Indeed it is not." But she said that the NSA, which conducts 12,000 polygraph exams a year of its employees, contractors and job applicants, was able to "elicit pertinent information."